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Elections and Election Machinery in Illinois 1818-1848.

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Before the nominating convention system was generally accepted in the late thirties by the political leaders of Illinois, the press of the state was the strongest single factor in choosing candidates and in concentrating party strength.¹ These results were brought about in several different ways: (1) by direct announcement made through the columns of friendly newspapers by the candidate himself, (2) by editorials, (3) by anonymous communications, (4) by requests purporting to come from friends of the candidate and addressed to the editor, (5) by requests addressed to the candidate, who forwarded them to the editor for publication.² In any case it is obvious that the editor held the whip hand, for unless he supported a given candidate, or at least remained neutral, he seriously handicapped any and all candidates by refusing them publicity; and without publicity, such as the press afforded, any aspirant for office had slim chances for success.

Such a situation compelled every prominent politician to have the support of one or more papers; and when support was not forthcoming from papers already established, new

1. Between 1824 and 1840 something like 160 newspapers were printed in Illinois. Of this number about 50 remained in 1840, and several of these were temporary campaign sheets. See Scott, *Illinois Newspapers*, III. Ills. Hist. Collections Vol. 6.

2. The newspapers of the period contain hundreds of examples under each head enumerated above. See *Edwardsville Spectator*, October 17, 1820, October 30, 1821, October 5, 1824; *Illinois Gazette*, September 25, 1824; *Illinois Intelligencer*, August 27, September 10, 1824; *Alton American*, April 14, 1834; *Alton Spectator*, March 4, 1841; *Alton Telegraph*, March 16, 1836; August 14, 1841; *Sangamo Journal*, January 26, February 2, 9, March 15, August 11, 1832. *Galena Advertiser*, August 3, 10, 1829; J. Reynolds to H. Eddy, 1834, *passim*. (Eddy MSS.)

ones were started in the most advantageous localities.³ More often, however, politicians gravitated in groups around the various papers of the state. In the earlier period the *Edwardsville Spectator*, the *Illinois Advocate*, and the *Illinois Gazette* were each the center of such a group, while in the late thirties and early forties the *Sangamo Journal*, the *State Register*, the *Chicago Democrat*, the *Alton Telegraph*, and the *Quincy Whig* performed similar functions.⁴ This grouping of politicians resulted in the formation of factions within parties, which continued to exist even after the convention system had been adopted in its entirety.⁵

The attitude of the typical editor toward his political opponent was one of severity. He espoused or opposed issues with unreasonable vehemence, and abused and slandered when occasion required. Such an attitude may have been due to deliberate choice, but it is more likely that it was forced on him by the political ideals of the time. Consequently a neutral newspaper would have been out of place in such an environment; and had an editor attempted to stand on middle ground, or even to temporize with the opposition, his political influence would have been at an end.

The adoption of the convention system in the late thirties diminished the influence of the newspapers as a force for concentrating party strength on particular candidates. For a

3. Good examples of such papers are *Republican Advocate*, Kaskaskia; *Illinois Whig*, Vandalia; *Free Press*, Vandalia. Letters of J. Reynolds to H. Eddy and to A. F. Grant, written between the years 1830 and 1834, throw light on this subject. Also letters of C. W. Clark, editor, *Shawneetown Journal* (this paper is not mentioned in Scott, *Illinois Newspapers*) to H. Eddy, 1833-4, *passim*. (Eddy MSS.)

4. H. Eddy to N. Edwards, July 28, 1829; A. F. Grant to J. Reynolds, February 2, 1834; A. F. Grant to J. Duncan, February 22, 1834; J. Reynolds to H. Eddy, February 17, March 24, July 3, 13, 1834; J. Reynolds to Eddy & Clark, July 4, 6, 1834; A. F. Grant to J. Reynolds, February 6, 1834. (Eddy MSS.)

5. A "famous battle" was carried on in the Whig ranks by the *Vandalia Free Press*, supported by the anti-junto Whigs, against the *Sangamo Journal*, which was supported by the "Springfield Junto." The Democrats likewise had their differences. The *State Register* struggled with the *Times* (Springfield) for supremacy. The former was supported by the state officials, the latter by Douglas, Peck, Trumbull, Brooks and Peters. See *Alton Telegraph*, January 27, February 10, 1844.

time the system was opposed by influential leaders in both parties,⁶ but there is little reason for believing that any great number of them opposed it on the ground of principle.⁷ They opposed it as a matter of expediency, because it seemed likely to be unpopular; they adopted it when it appeared that the mass of the people was friendly toward the system. The Democrats were the first to use the nominating convention.⁸ The Whigs, on the other hand, vacillated between a thorough-going convention and none at all, but the tide of opinion moved them to adopt the former view. As time went on opposition to the system became weaker, and the state convention of 1839 may be said to mark the beginning of its acceptance by the Whigs.⁹

In Illinois the convention system proper had its beginning in county and precinct mass meetings.¹⁰ As early as 1824, a mass meeting was held in Gallatin County to select a candidate for presidential elector. The practice does not seem, however, to

6. See Alton Telegraph, May 13, 1843; Illinois Statesman, April 29, 1843. For views on the subject see, Thompson, Attitude of the Western Whigs toward the Convention System, (Proceedings of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, V., 167 ff.) Dr. Fithian of Vermillion County expressed a similar feeling regarding the convention system and the growth of parties. W. Fithian to A. Williams, December 26, 1834. (Williams-Woodbury MSS.)

7. See House Journal, 1835-6, p. 27. For arguments for a convention by a Whig paper, see Chicago American, July 15, 29, 1835.

8. The Democrats, particularly those in the northern and central parts of the state, seemed to have had no hesitancy in fathering the system. Thus a resolution passed in a Cook County mass meeting read: "Resolved: That we will not recognize the pretended claims of any aspirant to any office, nor any person as a candidate for any office, unless he shall be nominated by a convention fairly called, at which every member of the party has an opportunity of being heard either in person or by his delegate. And that we will support all nominations made in such convention, and use all fair and honorable means to secure the election of individuals so brought before the people."—Chicago Democrat, July 8, 1835. Among the staunch friends of the convention system was E. Peck of Chicago. Peck had formerly held office in Canada, and the opponents of the system left nothing undone to convince the people that it was a British institution and hence un-American. See Sangamo Journal, December 12, 1835; Alton Telegraph, March 25, 1843; R. J. Hamilton to H. Eddy, January 30, 1838. (Eddy MSS.)

9. See Thompson, op. cit.; Alton Telegraph, May 13, 1843; Sangamo Journal, October 8, 1841.

10. It is believed that the first county convention ever held in Illinois in which nominations were made for county officers by regularly elected delegates was in Cook County, July 4, 1835. See Chicago Democrat, June and July, 1835, passim., October 14, 1835, January 13, 1836.

have grown to any great extent until the presidential campaign of 1832. During that campaign many local mass meetings were held,¹¹ likewise both parties held state conventions.¹² These state conventions differed materially from the ordinary state convention of the period, in that their members were regularly chosen in county mass meetings. The other type was composed of members of their respective parties. The functions of the regularly constituted state conventions increased with the years, and by 1839 the Whigs organized with a full complement of officers and committees.¹³

Of the committees of this convention the state central committee was the most important. It was composed of five members who were authorized to have entire control of the party's activities. It was empowered to delegate its authority to sub-committees whose units of operation should be the counties. Each of these sub-committees was expected to follow as far as possible the suggestions made by the central committee, which were as follows: (1) sub-committee to divide its county into small districts and appoint in each district a committee whose duty was to make a complete list of all voters in the district and to ascertain which candidates each voter expected to support; (2) district committees to work for the party ticket by personal solicitation and by distributing campaign literature; (3) district committees to report to their respective county committees once each month; (4) district committees to make first report not later than April 30, 1840; (5) county committees to report on the political conditions in their respective counties on the first of each month; (6) state central committee to keep county committees informed as to political conditions in the state as shown by the reports of the various county committees; (7) county committees to solicit subscriptions for

11. For accounts of typical mass meetings, see *Sangamo Journal*, August 2, 18, September 1, 8, 15, 22, 1832.

12. For a complete report of the state National-Republican convention, held at Vandalia in 1832, see *Sangamo Journal*, September 29, October 20, 1832. Reports of a Jackson-Johnson convention may be found in *Ibid.* April 5, 1832; see also *Illinois Advocate*, May 6, 1835.

13. *Sangamo Journal*, October 11, 1839.

a campaign newspaper to be established;¹⁴ (8) county committees to furnish results of all elections held in their respective counties; (9) county committees to prevent local differences from defeating the party's candidates for the general assembly; (10) county committees to keep the plan of organization secret from all except true and tried Whigs. This ambitious campaign organization was the product of Mr. Lincoln's efforts as a political leader. It set a standard for subsequent campaigns as long as the Whig party was a force in Illinois politics.

Little is known now about the collection and disbursement of campaign funds during this period. The usual procedure appears to have been for the friends of any particular candidate for an important office to advance sums of money with the understanding that they were to be repaid only in the event of success.¹⁵ In some sections of the state, and there are reasons for believing that it was a general practice, it was customary to assess the local leaders for funds to carry on state and congressional campaigns. In presidential campaigns the candidates chosen for electors were usually men of means, who were expected to canvass the state in the interest of the party without hope of reward other than that which comes with increased publicity. The printing and postage bills attached to these candidacies were some times met by local leaders, sometimes by the candidates themselves.¹⁶ The possession of wealth seems to have been neither a help nor a hindrance to political advancement. Edwards, Coles and Duncan were men of means, and likewise successful office-seekers. On the other hand, Kinney, Sloo, Hogan and H. C. Webb were comparatively wealthy, but unsuccessful in acquiring office. Lincoln's early poverty did not bar him from office, and he was but a type of a great body of public officials.

This was the period of the stump speaker and the circuit rider, and one of the marked characteristics of early Illinois

14. Perhaps the *Old Soldier*. See Scott, *Illinois Newspapers*, 323; T. C. Browne, to H. Eddy, February 25, 1840. (Eddy MSS.)

15. A. F. Grant to J. Duncan, February 22, 1834. (Eddy MSS.)

16. Eddy MSS. (Undated) No. 163.

politics was the relatively large number of lawyers and preachers occupying position of political leadership. Few, if any of the speeches of these men have been preserved in authentic form, but if one may judge from their correspondence, it would be safe to say that the virtue of their oratorical efforts lay more in the manner of their speaking than in what they said. Even though the oratory was often-times crude and ungrammatical, it was effective; and certainly a more polished kind, without the fire which a western speaker knew how to inject, would have fallen flat.

Inseparable from the stump speech was the debate. Some were prearranged, but more were extempore. An outburst from a candidate or his friends was sure to be met with a rejoinder from the same rostrum or from one near at hand. In the midst of important campaigns, court yards, court rooms and public halls became the arenas where forensic and even fistic battles were fought. There was no dearth of combatants, for every lawyer, ambitious for political and professional advancement, was ready to enter the lists. Particularly in and about the general assembly was the opportunity taken for political debate. What was said and done there was the cue for local politicians throughout the state; and more than one political reputation rested on the ability of its possessor to influence his fellow lawmakers. On many occasions Mr. Lincoln debated the issues at stake with political opponents, and his reputation as a debater began two decades prior to his encounters with Douglas in 1858.

During the late thirties the ratification meeting and the rally came to be a force in determining political issues. The former, as the name implies, was merely a jollification meeting at which formal nominations, particularly those for the presidency, were ratified amidst huzzas and enthusiastic speeches. Because of the sparseness of the population and the difficulties of travel, such meetings in the earlier days were impossible except on a small scale. With the increase in population and improvements in means of travel, however, these meetings became increasingly important for creating enthusiasm and

promoting party solidarity. Before 1840, crowds made up of a few hundred were typical, but with the coming of the "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" campaign, came the practice of assembling large crowds to see fantastical parades and to hear inflammatory speeches. Such meetings were effective in that the enthusiasm generated was contagious, and after 1840 they were integral parts of political campaigns.

The methods of voting in vogue during this period were even more unique than the manner of campaigning. Between 1818 and 1848, either one of two methods was used. One was by ballot, the other by *viva voce*. Of the two, the latter generally prevailed. Even in the use of the latter method the ballot often had a place. The voter carried it to the polling place and read from it the names of the candidates he desired to support. The election clerk wrote the voter's name in the election sheet and indicated after it his preference among the candidates. The usual method employed was as follows.

By an Order of the County Commissioners, Court of Fayette County, an Election was held at the House of James Altum (in East Fork Township) for State and County Officers, on the first Monday in August A. D. 1822

FAYETTE COUNTY	For Governor			Lieut. Governor	For Congress	Representatives for Fayette and Montgomery Counties						For County Commissioners of Fayette County				For Sheriff	For Coroner									
	For Governor					Jas. Lemon, Jr.	Jno. G. Lofton	Dan'l P. Cook	Jno. McClean	E. M. Townsend	Wm. Berry	Walter Baugh	Jno. H. Wakefield	Jno. Warnock	Jno. Depew			Paul Beck	Wm. Johnston	Jas. Allen	Henry Walker	John Whitley, Jr.	Jno. C. Kellogg	Alex H. Mitchell	Jno. Oliver	J. Delleplaine
	Jos Philip	Jas. B. Moore	Thos. C. Brown																							
Edwd. Cowles	1	...	...	1	...	1	...	...	1	2	...	...	...	...	...	1	2	...	1	...	1	...	1	...	
Henry Lee	1	...	...	2	...	2	...	...	2	...	1	...	...	...	...	2	...	2	...	2	...	2	...	2	...
Harry Lee	2	...	...	3	...	3	1	...	3	...	2	...	...	...	...	3	...	3	...	3	...	3	...	3	...
John Phelps	3	1	...	4	...	4	...	...	4	...	...	...	...	...	...	4	...	4	...	4	...	4	...	4	...
Zaddock Phelps	...	...	...	5	...	5	...	...	5	...	...	...	...	...	...	5	...	5	...	5	...	5	...	5	...
Ebenezer Dagat	...	...	1	6	...	6	...	...	6	...	...	...	...	...	...	6	...	6	...	6	...	6	...	6	...
John Fisher	...	...	2	7	...	7	...	...	7	...	...	...	...	...	...	7	...	7	...	7	...	7	...	7	...
Chancy Lee	...	...	3	...	...	...	2	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Cornelius Dunnam	4	...	...	...	...	...	3	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Jacob Phelps	...	...	...	8	...	8	...	...	8	...	...	...	...	...	...	8	...	8	...	8	...	8	...	8	...
James Nichols	...	4	...	9	...	9	...	...	9	...	...	...	...	...	...	9	...	9	...	9	...	9	...	9	...
Francis Herman	...	...	...	...	...	...	4	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Jesse Griffin	5	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
John Edington	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Federick Phelps	...	5	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Robert Nichols	...	...	5	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
James Altum	...	...	6	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Henry McDaniel	...	6	...	10	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Joseph Bates	6	...	...	...	1	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Jesse Nichols	7	...	...	11	...	...	9	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Samuel Davidson	...	7	...	2	...	10	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
B. A. Miles	8	...	...	...	...	11	...	...	...	10	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
William Nichols	...	...	7	...	...	...	11	...	...	11	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
William Howard	...	8	...	12	...	...	12	...	...	12	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Will Marshall	...	...	8	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	10	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...

The elections of this period were characterized by their lack of uniformity in procedure. First, there was no limit whatever to the number of candidates that might be voted for at any given election.¹⁷ Second, the number of candidates for the same office varied from precinct to precinct.¹⁸ Third, it was a general practice in some sections of the state to vote directly for president and vice-president.¹⁹ Discrepancies which now would be considered as serious often crept in with no ill effect whatever. Thus in the state election of 1822, of the four candidates for governor the names of three were mis-spelled in a single precinct in Fayette County; and in the precinct in which the state capital was located, the name of the successful candidate, Edward Coles, was spelled "Cowles."²⁰ Such a mistake appears the more strange when it is known that one of the election officials was a state officer. The great wonder is that complications did not arise in the form of contested elections.

Few franchise restrictions were placed on the people. Up to the year 1849, practically every male adult who had resided in Illinois for six months was entitled to vote. In elections for state officers, voters of one county very often voted in another county. There is no evidence at hand to show what test was applied in such cases, and if any formal oath or affirmation was required the election sheets fail to indicate the fact.

Although the privileges of franchise were granted liberally, the number of officers filled by direct vote of the people was limited. The fathers of the first state constitution, and the lawmakers that immediately followed them, manifested slight confidence in the ability of the people to choose their own officers. But two state officers, the governor and lieutenant-governor, were chosen directly by the people. The secretary

17. Compare the MSS. election returns for representative in 1831 in the county archives of Coles, Fayette, Shelby, Sangamon, Macoupin counties.

18. See MSS. election returns for the year 1840 in the archives of Coles County.

19. See MSS. election returns for the year 1836 in the archives of Coles and Shelby Counties.

20. See MSS. election returns for the year 1822 in the archives of Fayette County.

of state was selected by the governor with the consent of the senate, while the rest of the state officers were elected by the two houses in joint session. The judges and district attorneys were appointed by the general assembly, and these officers in turn appointed minor court officials in their respective counties. The election of state officers by the lawmakers gave rise to legislative caucuses. Because the Whigs were everlasting in the minority, and hence had little use for such a system, they decried it in the most extravagant terms.²¹ There was also considerable dissatisfaction with the caucus in the Democratic ranks, but its general use indicates its acceptance by a majority of the party.

Caucuses of a different nature existed among the Whig leaders, who met not to divide the spoils of victory, but to determine issues and to agree on candidates for subsequent elections. Even the most bitter opponents of the convention system did not deny that they sometimes participated in such meetings. This practice disrupted the Whigs to a certain extent. Those members of the party who opposed the caucus declared that the party will was thwarted by a small group of Whig politicians whom they called the "Springfield Junto." Among the members of this junto were Lincoln, W. H. Herndon, S. T. Logan and Stuart. There seems to have been a justification, however, for such an organization. It originated among the Whigs rather than among the Democrats for no other reason than the refusal of the former party to adopt the convention system. Lincoln and his political friends desired to win, and only turned to secret meetings when open ones were rejected by their followers. The late adoption of the convention system by the Whigs did not destroy the power of the junto. Its members merely adapted their political tactics to suit the new situation; and up to the very last day of the existence of the party as a national organization, this small group of men shaped its policies and dominated the choice of candidates for the more important offices.

21. G. Churchill to G. Flagg, December 3, 1844. (Churchill MSS.)